

CULTURE DESK

A NEW HISTORY OF ARABIA, WRITTEN IN STONE

How strange rocks—and an obscure language—are changing a decades-old academic consensus.



By Elias Muhanna

May 23, 2018



On a small rock found in Jordan, Ahmad Al-Jallad, a linguistics professor in the Netherlands, discovered text that he thought could be the oldest known record of literary expression in Arabic. Illustration by Olivier Kugler

A few years ago, Ahmad Al-Jallad, a professor of Arabic and Semitic linguistics at Leiden University, in the Netherlands, opened his e-mail and was excited to see that he had received several photographs of rocks. The images—sent by Al-Jallad’s mentor, Michael Macdonald, a scholar at Oxford who studies ancient inscriptions—were of artifacts from a recent archeological survey in Jordan. Macdonald pointed Al-Jallad’s attention to one in particular: a small rock covered with runelike marks in a style of writing called boustrophedon, named for lines that wrap back and forth, “like an ox turning in a field.” It was Safaitic, an alphabet that flourished in northern Arabia two millennia ago, and Al-Jallad and Macdonald are among a very small number of people who can read it. Al-Jallad began to transcribe the text, and, within a few minutes, he could see that the rock was an essential piece of a historical puzzle that he had been working on for years.

The history of Arabia just before the birth of Islam is a profound mystery, with few written sources describing the milieu in which Muhammad lived. Historians had long believed that the Bedouin nomads who lived in the area composed exquisite poetry to record the feats of their tribes but had no system for writing it down. In recent years, though, scholars have made profound advances in explaining how ancient speakers of early Arabic used the letters of other alphabets to transcribe their speech. These alphabets included Greek and Aramaic, and also Safaitic; Macdonald’s rock was one of more than fifty thousand such texts found in the deserts of the southern Levant. Safaitic glyphs look nothing like the cursive, legato flow of Arabic script. But when read aloud they are recognizable as a form of Arabic—archaic but largely intelligible to the modern speaker.

The inscription on Macdonald’s rock included the name of a person (“Ghayyar’el son of Ghawth”), a narrative, and a prayer. It was the narrative that stood out to Al-Jallad. Reading it aloud, he noted a sequence of words repeated three times, which he suspected was a refrain in a poetic text. This would make it the oldest known record of literary expression in Arabic—evidence, however slim, of a written poetic tradition that had never been explored.

Al-Jallad, who is thirty-two, was born in Salt Lake City. His father came to the United States from Jordan to attend college, and met his mother, who is from Texas, at Weber State University, in Utah. The family moved to Kuwait in 1989 but returned a year later, at the outset of the first Gulf War, and settled near Tampa. “We didn’t speak Arabic at home, because my mother didn’t understand it,” Al-Jallad told me. “The only connection I had to the Middle East was through books about ancient civilizations.” When Al-Jallad was a teen-ager, one of his favorite books was “Noah’s Flood,” a study arguing that the flood narratives of the Bible, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and other ancient texts were inspired by the flooding of the Black Sea, around 5600 B.C. “The mix of archeology, geology, and ancient languages blew my mind,” Al-Jallad said. “I had no idea if it was right, but I was hooked.”

As an undergraduate, at the University of South Florida, Al-Jallad got a job at a library on campus and read whatever he could find on Near Eastern civilizations. “I tried to learn Akkadian, so I could read the original Epic of Gilgamesh, but didn’t get very far,” he said. He wrote to professors in Semitic studies around the country asking for guidance. They all replied, “Nobody starts with Akkadian—you need to learn Biblical Hebrew, classical Arabic, and Syriac first,” he said. For two years, he studied those languages on his own in the library. After graduating, he was accepted into Harvard’s doctoral program in Semitic philology.

Al-Jallad is now one of the world’s foremost authorities on early Arabic, leading excavations around the Middle East. The study of early Islam has traditionally depended not on rock inscriptions but on chronicles and literary sources composed a few centuries after Muhammad’s death—a method of research that Al-Jallad likens to reading the history of North America entirely from the perspective of the first European settlers. He is confident that scholars will soon be able to tell the earliest history of Islam using evidence from the time of Muhammad’s birth. “We will find texts from the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad,” he said. “I am one-hundred-per-cent certain of that. It’s just a matter of time.”

The effort to decode the Safaitic texts began in the spring of 1857, when a young Scotsman named Cyril Graham set off from Jerusalem on a tour of Syria. Like many other European visitors to the Holy Land, Graham was interested in the sites of Biblical archeology, which, he wrote in 1858, would offer proof of “the invariable accuracy of the sacred Historian.” While travelling through the desert, he learned from Bedouin guides about a volcanic tableland called the Harrah, which was littered with strange rock inscriptions. The guides led him to the outskirts of Safa, a volcanic region southeast of Damascus. At night, while his guides were asleep, Graham left the camp and, in bright moonlight, discovered a plain covered with inscribed rocks:

I gazed on these marvelous stones, and tried to picture to myself what people they were who centuries ago had lived here and had employed themselves in carving these curious symbols. What did it all mean?

Graham announced his discovery at the Royal Geographical Society, and other expeditions followed. In 1877, an Orientalist from Ottoman Edirne deciphered most of the alphabet, bringing the language of the inscriptions into blurry focus. But, even as the script became legible, its references remained cryptic. “The first scholars who worked on the inscriptions did so in an impressionistic sort of way,” Al-Jallad said. “They’d rely almost exclusively on classical-Arabic dictionaries to decipher the texts, or, worse, they’d ask the local Bedouin what they meant.” Enno Littmann, an Orientalist who visited Syria in 1899, with a contingent from Princeton University, and completed the decipherment, labored over what he found on the rocks. Alongside scores of theophoric names (“God the King,” “God Rewards”) were more puzzling appellations, such as “Changer of Undergarments,” “Branded on the Testicle,” and “He Rose and Shook.” Could these be old tribal nicknames? Or had the words been deciphered incorrectly?

For a century, Safaitic remained an almost hidden corner of Arabian epigraphy, an already esoteric area. But, by 2007, when Al-Jallad arrived at Harvard, the field was undergoing a transformation. Digital photography was making a wealth of new inscriptional data

available to scholars, and the number of Safaitic texts discovered in the Levant had swollen dramatically, vastly exceeding the number of Latin inscriptions recorded at Pompeii, the Roman Empire's most famous source of graffiti. (A few Safaitic inscriptions were even found *in* Pompeii, on the walls outside a small theatre, probably scribbled by Arabian members of the Roman army.) Michael Macdonald amassed a vast collection of photographs of these texts and launched a digital Safaitic database, with the help of Laila Nehmé, a French archeologist and one of the world's leading experts on early Arabic inscriptions. "When we started working, Michael's corpus was all on index cards," Nehmé recalled. "With the database, you could search for sequences of words across the whole collection, and you could study them statistically. It worked beautifully."

In 2013, Al-Jallad used the Safaitic database as he worked on an inscription containing several mysterious words: *Maleh*, *Dhakar*, and *Amet*. Earlier scholars had assumed that they were the names of unknown places. Al-Jallad, unconvinced, searched the database and discovered another inscription that contained all three. Both inscriptions discussed migrations in search of water, and a possibility occurred to him: if the words referred to seasons of migration, then they might be the names of constellations visible at those times.

Al-Jallad began pulling up every inscription that mentioned migrating in search of rain, and soon he had a long list of terms that had resisted translation. Comparing them with the Greek, Aramaic, and Babylonian zodiacs, he started making connections. *Dhakar* matched up nicely with *dikra*, the Aramaic word for Aries, and *Amet* was derived from an Arabic verb meaning "to measure or compute quantity"—a good bet for the scales of Libra. Hunting for Capricorn, the goat-fish constellation, Al-Jallad found the word *ya'mur* in Edward Lane's "Arabic-English Lexicon," whose translation read, "A certain beast of the sea, or . . . a kind of mountain-goat." He stayed up all night, sifting the database and checking words against dictionaries of ancient Semitic languages. By morning, he had deciphered a complete, previously unknown Arabian zodiac. "We'd thought that they were place names, and, in a way, they were," he told me. "They were places in the sky."

he province of archeology, a fictional archeologist once said, is the search for facts, not truth.

In recasting the history of Arabia, archeological research has challenged some canonical Muslim narratives about the emergence of Islam. The time before Muhammad's revelation is known in Arabic as the *Jahiliyya*, usually translated as the Age of Ignorance. According to Fred Donner, a historian at the University of Chicago, "The Islamic account of the *Jahiliyya* is a saga of unrelieved paganism, which emphasizes the difference between the darkness of unbelief and the light that Islam brought to Arabia." Scholars like Al-Jallad and Donner see this still prevalent view as a product of medieval Muslim thinkers, who wrote history through the prism of orthodox beliefs. The real *Jahiliyya*, the scholars argue, probably had much more in common with Islam than previously thought. "I have a suspicion that some of the early writings that we assume were Islamic—because they use language that seems to refer to the Quran—were actually pre-Islamic," Donner told me. "Maybe this is how people talked about religion on the eve of Islam." Other scholars stress the need for caution. Peter Webb, a scholar of classical Arabic literature at Leiden University, told me that "any information that these Safaitic inscriptions can give us about the centuries before Islam can only help, because we're coming from a situation of almost no empirical evidence." He added, "The linguists are going to be well excited about what they're finding. But the historian is still, like, 'Yeah, it's good. You've got names. You've got lots and lots of names.' "

The idea that elements of Islam had antecedents in pre-Islamic cultures is not controversial; the Quran suggests links to the *Hanifiyya*, a monotheistic faith descended from Abraham. But traditional Muslim theology, along with much Western scholarship, regards the birth of Islam as a radical break with Arabia's past. To Al-Jallad, however, the inscriptional evidence, containing many references to peoples, events, and places that appear in the Quran and other early Islamic narratives, suggests the opposite: an evolution of Arabian ideas and practices. "This kind of society would have been very similar to the first audience of the Quran," Al-Jallad said. "The inscriptions tell us what their world was like."



Photograph Courtesy Elias Muhanna

Al-Jallad's research coincides with a revival of regional interest in early history. Earlier this year, the French government signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia—rumored to be worth more than twenty billion dollars—to develop a tourist attraction centered on a settlement of the ancient Nabataean kingdom. This work would continue a surge of Saudi exploration that began in the eighties, sponsored by oil wealth and motivated by the desire to show that the country had a glorious pre-Islamic past. “The Saudis are building a national narrative,” Al-Jallad told me. “This research gives Arabia a different status in the ancient Near East, so that it’s not just Iran, Iraq, and the Levant that had great civilizations.” Several other Gulf Arab countries have hosted their own excavations in recent decades. Robert Hoyland, a professor of archeology at N.Y.U., described these efforts as a response to the frenetic construction in newly rich places like Dubai and Qatar. “All of those governments have money to spend, and they all want to prove that they’re older than each other,” he said.

Not all of them will be pleased by the way that new research rewrites old understandings. In traditional historiography and common lore, southern Arabia is believed to be the primeval

homeland of the Arabs and the source of the purest Arabic. In this telling, Arabic was born deep in the peninsula and spread with the Islamic conquests; as it made contact with other languages, it gradually devolved into the many Arabic dialects spoken today. Classical Arabic remains the preëminent symbol of a unified Arab culture, and the ultimate marker of eloquence and learning. To Al-Jallad, the Safaitic inscriptions indicate that various ancient forms of Arabic were present many centuries before the rise of classical Arabic, in places such as Syria and Jordan. He argues that the language may have originated there and then migrated south—suggesting that the “corrupt” forms of Arabic spoken around the region may, in fact, have lineages older than classical Arabic. Macdonald told me, “His theory will inevitably meet a lot of opposition, mainly for non-academic reasons. But it’s becoming more and more convincing.”

When Macdonald sent the image of the rock inscribed with the poem, he included its G.P.S. coördinates, and Al-Jallad decided that he would hunt it down. In April, 2017, I accompanied him to the deserts of eastern Jordan, and we were joined by Ali Al-Manaser, an archeologist at Oxford, and Ahmad, a young field hand from a neighboring town. After driving for hours along the two-lane road that runs from Amman to Baghdad, we pulled to the side and stopped our truck. There was nothing to see for miles but basalt boulders, ash-colored and pocked like pumice. Inscriptions, Al-Jallad explained, tend to cluster on higher ground, where nomadic herders could keep an easier watch for predators. In a landscape with no other traces of human civilization, the rocks preserved the nomads’ names and genealogies, along with descriptions of their animals, their wars, their journeys, and their rituals. There were prayers to deities, worries about the lack of rain, and complaints about the cruelty of Romans.

In a small valley, an ancient grave was surrounded by a toppled cairn, with a desert meadow of nettles and tiny blue wildflowers below. Al-Jallad walked to a basalt slab shaped like a giant arrowhead, covered in etchings. As the field hand stood nearby, he squatted and read aloud, “*Li ‘Addan bin Aws bin Adam bin Sa’d, wa-ra’aya ha-d-da’na bi-qasf kabir ‘ala akhihi*

sabiy fa-hal-Lat fasiyyat.” The writing said that the grandson of a man named Adam had once sat in this spot and pastured his sheep; he grieved for a brother who’d been captured by an enemy tribe, and prayed to the goddess Allat for his deliverance. As Al-Jallad read, the field hand stared, astonished that these markings encoded a language that he could, more or less, understand.

For three days, the members of Al-Jallad’s expedition walked across hilltops, logging a thousand new Safaitic inscriptions. Around the remains of cairns, there were texts carved everywhere, and rock art, too—drawings of lions leaping on horses, warriors with bows and spears, gazelles, ostriches, dancers with flutes. The inscriptions, Al-Jallad explained, were a form of monument-making. “The fact that they don’t appear monumental to our eyes is because our idea of monumentality comes from a Greco-Roman model, where things are neat and square,” he said.



Photograph Courtesy Elias Muhanna

Al-Manaser, a Jordanian who has made dozens of trips across the region, seemed to have a mental map of the hills surveyed by earlier researchers, going back to the nineteenth century. On a few occasions, when someone proposed a nearby hill, Al-Manaser squinted at it and shook his head. “Published,” he said. Still, the promise of discovery transformed Al-Jallad’s countenance. “In the desert, you feel like a complete human being,” he told me one afternoon. “Everything is working, your senses are heightened, you’re thinking, you’re moving.”

On the third day, not far from the hilltop grave, Al-Jallad found a text that concluded, “May this writing not be obscured.” This was a common invocation, but he immediately registered that it was missing a specific grammatical particle. “We haven’t seen that before,” he said, making a note. A few hours later, he found a word, *intasa*, that didn’t appear in the archive. “A new word!” he crowed. Abu Bashar, our Bedouin driver, proposed that it meant “to be forgotten after having once been famous.” Al-Jallad, though wary of repeating his forebears’ mistakes, asked him to use it in a sentence.

With the help of Macdonald’s G.P.S. coördinates, we found the poem at the top of a hill. It was on a stone the size of a shoebox, with one face densely covered in inscriptions. Al-Jallad picked it up and studied its features, tracing the letters with a finger and turning the rock around in his hands to follow the wandering script. It began with the genealogy of Ghayyar’el son of Ghawth, who “alighted in the meadow and kept watch for his maternal uncle.” In the middle of the text were three verses. Al-Jallad read the verses aloud, first in Arabic and then in translation:

May his halting be only for war

So let here this day be the final encampment

Foremost fame!

So let here this day be the final encampment

Those who return suffer

So let here this day be the final encampment

Al-Jallad stared silently at the rock and then looked up, triumphant. We walked down the hill, taking turns carrying the poem, and put it in the truck, to take to a museum in Jordan. “This is one of the only places in the world where you can make major archeological discoveries just by going for a walk,” Al-Jallad told me. “There are treasures everywhere. You don’t need to dig. They’re out in the open.”



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